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Vietnam Dissolves Its Subjects

Vietnam has earned its reputation as the Prussia of Southeast Asia. After humbling French and American armies, it conquered Laos and Cambodia, then turned ferociously on its subject peoples. This Christmas week, Vietnam mounted a fresh offensive against Cambodian rebels, driving 63,000 more civilians across the border into Thailand.

This dumping of unwanted people was heretically anticipated by Bertolt Brecht, the Communist writer who lived in the real Prussia. When East Berlin's workers rose in vain revolt against their Communist masters in 1953, leaflets were circulated asserting that the people had "lost the Government's confidence." Would it not be simpler, Brecht wondered, "if the Government dissolved the People and elected another?"

Vietnam has embraced this simpler solution. Wedded to a doctrine that pretends to be scientific, Hanoi applies radical surgery to nonconformists. Among the luckier are the 600,000 Vietnamese who have fled by boat since 1975. Less lucky are the 10,000 rotting in jail because they once worked for Americans. Unluckiest of all are the Cambodians, first beset by Vietnamese guerrillas, then by American bombing, next by the genocidal Communism of Pol Pot, then by famine and finally by a Vietnamese invasion in 1978.

Three million Cambodians have perished in these disasters, roughly a third of the nation. Most of the deaths occurred under successive Communist regimes. An additional 600,000 Cambodians have fled into exile. Yet even after this bloodletting, the

client regime installed by Vietnam needs 180,000 troops to protect it from three rebel forces.

To its shame, Vietnam has rejected every proposal for restoring self-determination to an ill-used people. After visiting Hanoi this week, Representatives Steven Solarz and Robert Torricelli detected no willingness even to engage in serious talks about ending the war in Cambodia.

The unavoidable conclusion is that Vietnam wants to elect a new people, in ways described by the Czech historian Milan Hubl: "The first step to liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was."

Given that Vietnamese objective, it is surely right to continue helping the non-Communist Cambodian resistance and to help shelter those who flee. But the United States has a further obligation: to work for the release of the 10,000 Vietnamese now in "re-education camps" because they once worked for Americans.

Vietnam's Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, said last May that those outcasts could leave "tomorrow" for the United States. Secretary of State Shultz agreed to receive them, but the processing problems drag on. Now Hanoi says that unless Washington curbs anti-Vietnamese activities among exiles it may not release anyone. A regime that would rather change its people than itself seems incapable even of this modest humanity.